

# The Essential Seriousness of Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*: A Study in Structure

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## I. THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE MORAL FABLES

THE *Moral Fables* has long been underrated, even by its foremost proponents. Lord Hailes, in 1770, thought enough of several of the *Moralitates* to print them, but he left out the corresponding fables.<sup>1</sup> H. Harvey Wood, in his editions of Henryson's complete works (1933, 1958), called the *Fables* "the greatest, and the most original, of Henryson's works," but still referred to it as a "translation," rejoicing that "the moralising, which is admittedly dull, is confined to the postscript."<sup>2</sup> Older criticism tended to confine its praise to the work's charming humor, detailed realism, level-headedness, and careful maintenance of the human/bestial irony. In general, Henryson's major work was dismissed as more or less innocuous, but containing occasional flashes of sensitivity.

Since the 1960's there seems to have been a resurgence of interest in all of Henryson's work. Oxford University Press has issued new editions of all the poetry,<sup>3</sup> the *Moral Fables* has spawned more than a dozen Ph.D. theses, the "Testament of Cresseid" has been called one

<sup>1</sup> Sir David Dalrymple Hailes, *Ancient Scottish Poems, Published from the Manuscript of George Bannatyne*, 1568 (Edinburgh, 1770, rpt. London, 1815), p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> H. Harvey Wood, *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson*, p. xv. Although Henryson himself states that he is making "ane maner of Translatioun" (32), we should by no means take him literally on this point. All source studies have demonstrated, knowingly or otherwise, how strikingly Henryson differs from whatever previous works he used.

<sup>3</sup> *Robert Henryson: Poems*, ed. Charles Elliott, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1974); *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981).

of the greatest poems in English,<sup>4</sup> and even the minor poems are beginning to receive individual attention.<sup>5</sup> Concerning the *Moral Fables* in particular, there is a growing sense that something more important than typical fabulizing is at work. George Clark, in his fine article, expresses it well:

As Henryson recreated them, his Aesopic stories outgrow the artistic and intellectual limitations of their traditional form; comparing one of Henryson's fables to its probable source, the difference seems essentially stylistic, but the development of the style produces narratives whose implications compel our attention and go beyond the explicit moralizations conventionally attached to Aesopic fables.<sup>6</sup>

Denton Fox states with emphasis that "both the *Fables* and the *Orpheus* are, in the end, serious poems about morality."<sup>7</sup> Matthew P. McDiarmid, after years of delighting in the merely pleasant aspects of the poem, has now "become aware of a personality much less at peace, a much more demanding and challenging mind, neither quite at home in his own Christian world nor easily accommodated to the taste of our materialistic one."<sup>8</sup> Nicolai von Kreisler has found the "Tale of the Lion and the Mouse" to be "invested with greater authority than the fabulist ordinarily enjoyed,"<sup>9</sup> an opinion of even more significance than he was aware, as I shall try to demonstrate below. Yet even recently we still hear that "a general air of assurance

<sup>4</sup> See Jane Adamson's lengthy and spirited article, "Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*: Fyre' and 'Cauld,'" *CR*, XVIII (1976), 39-60, and Denton Fox's compelling study in his edition of the poem (London, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Robert Henryson's 'Orpheus and Eurydice' and the Orpheus Tradition of the Middle Ages," *Speculum* XLI (1966), 643-55; John Stephens, "Devotion and Wit in Henryson's 'The Annunciation,'" *ES*, LI (1970), 323-31; Dorena A. Wright, "Henryson's 'Orpheus and Eurydice' and the Tradition of the Muses," *MAE*, XL (1971), 41-7; Denton Fox, "Henryson's 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne,'" *SP*, LX (1972), 453-60; Charles A. Hallet, "Theme and Structure in Henryson's 'The Annunciation,'" *SSL*, X (1973), 165-74; George S. Peek, "Robert Henryson's View of Original Sin in 'The Biudy Serk,'" *SSL*, X (1973), 199-206; John MacQueen, "Neoplatonism and Orpheus in Fifteenth-Century Scotland: The Evidence of Henryson's 'New Orpheus,'" *ScS*, XX (1976), 68-89.

<sup>6</sup> George Clark, "Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transfigured," *ELH*, XLIII (1976),

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<sup>7</sup> Denton Fox, *The Testament of Cresseid*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew P. McDiarmid, "Robert Henryson in His Poems," *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature. Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. A. J. Aitken, M. P. McDiarmid, and D. S. Thomson (Glasgow, 1977), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolai von Kreisler, "Henryson's Visionary Fable: Tradition and Craftsmanship in 'The Lion and the Mouse,'" *TSLL*, XV (1973), 395.

and calm prevails" over the poetry,<sup>10</sup> that the *Moral Fables* was "apparently left incomplete,"<sup>11</sup> and that the fables are "very lively and charming poems which one yet feels like calling *only* charming and lively."<sup>12</sup>

To this point, the "something more important than typical fabulizing" has been identified as the delicate yet forceful nature of Henryson's irony<sup>13</sup> or his alleged use of political allegory.<sup>14</sup> I suggest, however, that Henryson's highly serious and highly cynical message in the *Moral Fables* comes to us through the subtle yet substantially important structure of the poem, which in turn requires the conclusion that the poem is a unified and complete work and by no means "*only* charming and lively" (though indeed *most* charming and *most* lively). While we can enjoy Henryson's *Fables* on first reading because of the sheer delight produced by his wit, his humor, his love of language, his sensitive ear, and his keen perception of human nature, a better understanding of the literary aspects of the work, especially its structure, can generate additional appreciation of his fundamental seriousness, his frustration over human weaknesses, his deep sense of pity, and, ultimately, his rather bleak view of human existence (or at least of life in fifteenth-century Scotland). We should allow neither the bright view nor the bleak one to dominate our attention; they are both continually present in the work, and the friction between the two, which produces emotional and intellectual paradoxes at many points, may be the very agent that keeps us captivated, perhaps increasingly captivated, upon many re-readings. The structure will be discussed below; here let us look at the other signs that the work is no mere humorous entertainment.

Henryson gives us three clues at the outset that the *Moral Fables* will be a work of high seriousness. The first is his choice of stanza form, Rhyme Royal, which Martin Stevens has demonstrated was intended only for elevated poetry dealing with the most solemn of subjects and occasions, perhaps originally limited to public ceremonies at which the monarch was present.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London, 1977), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Burrow, "Henryson's *The Preaching of the Swallow*," *ELC*, XXV (1975), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 244.

<sup>13</sup> See especially David M. Murtaugh's fine article, "Henryson's Animals," *TSL*, XIV (1972), 405-21.

<sup>14</sup> See note 7, above.

rhyme royal was the first consciously shaped stanza of high style in English Literature. After Chaucer used it with such great flexibility in the *Troilus*, it set the mode for serious, elevated long poems in the English language until the sixteenth century. There is certainly no doubt that the stanza was the favorite among Chaucer's imitators throughout the fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

While Henryson's use of the form by no means guarantees the seriousness of his content, it should at least prepare his readers for the possibility of a solemn literary experience, despite his displays of humor and homeliness.

Henryson gives us the second clue in his "Prologue" when he raises the question of how to justify the use of frivolous verse and, simultaneously, warns us that we will have to work hard to extract his deeper meanings. In his opening stanza he defends "feinyeit fabils of ald poetre" (fictitious poetic fables of old) which, although not "al grunded upon truth" (entirely based on truth), still have an important function, "to repreif the hail misleing / Off man by figure of an uther thing" (to criticize man's evil ways through allegory and symbol). He implies that most writing of this sort tends towards the dour and the dull, and therefore he will lighten the task by using his sometimes humorous animals.

And clerkis sayis, it is richt profitabill  
Amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport,  
To blyth the spreit and gar the tyme be schort.

And scholars say it is most profitable to mix a merry sport in with earnest matters, to lighten the spirit and make the time seem short.

(19-21)<sup>16</sup>

He repeats the thought in the next stanza: "With sad materis sum merines to ming, / Accordis weill" (It makes good sense to mix some merriness with matters that are sober). Note, however, his emphasis: lightness must be *added* to the general solemnity; he writes in earnest and mixes in the merriness. We misunderstand his purpose, then, if we allow his delightful touches to dominate our attention.

We are also warned that these fables are tough nuts to crack (stanza 3) and that we must expect to strain our minds somewhat if we are to

<sup>15</sup> Martin Stevens, "The Royal Stanza in Early English Literature," *PMLA*, XCIV (1979), 74.

<sup>16</sup> The text of Henryson throughout this essay is taken from Denton Fox's edition, *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981). All translations are by the present author.

make complete sense of the work. This, then, is our second clue: we should not be fooled by the presence of "merriness" into disregarding the essential seriousness of the work. Since fifteenth-century readers considered fables to be literary works of the highest seriousness, we should not hesitate to apply Denton Fox's statement about the tragic poem, "The Testament of Cresseid," to the *Moral Fables* as well: "Henryson took for granted an audience who would see, because they were looking for it, the evidence that this poem was serious, moral, and Christian."<sup>17</sup> Henryson gives us our third clue by his particular use of the traditional content of the first fable, the "Tale of the Cock and the Jasper." Because of its direct applicability to the reader and to the experience of reading fables, this tale has often appeared first in Aesopic collections. While looking for food one morning, a Cock finds a rare gem on a dunghill but passes it by in favor of finding something more digestible. In the usual moral application, the Cock represents the foolish man, and the Jasper, wisdom, an allegorical formula that warns the readers against the folly of disregarding wisdom (i.e., the fables that follow) when it lies before them. Henryson follows this tradition, and in his *Moralitas* he laments the disappearance of moral wisdom in his world ("But now, alas, this Gem is lost and hidden"), urging us to seek it out:

Go seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay.

Go, seek the Jasper, you who will, for there it lies.

"Thair" seems indeed to refer to the fables which follow.

Simultaneously, however, Henryson differs from all previous re-counters of this fable, as George Clark points out,<sup>18</sup> by expanding the tale with a great many details which make the Cock's rejection of the Jasper look rather praiseworthy. This bird rises early and sets about his major task with diligence, in contrast to the young girls "wonton and insolent" who have so little regard for their work that they sweep out precious jewels with the trash. The Cock recognizes the nobility of the Jasper immediately, knows its true worth and rightful place (78-84), considers the irony of a lowly animal having found it (85-

<sup>17</sup> Denton Fox, *The Testament of Cresseid*, Introduction.

<sup>18</sup> George Clark, "Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transfigured," *ELH*, XLIII (1976), 1-18.

91), considers his own needs and limitations in life (92–105), rhetorically wishes the Jasper better fortune (106–12), and departs. Clark suggests that Henryson hands us a particularly hard nut to crack by complicating the story with these compelling details.

If the Cock does not reject the jewel out of arrogance or exclusive preoccupation with bestial appetite but because a real barnyard cock cannot pocket or possess a gemstone, the simplistic moral proposition that the free agent, man, willfully disregards the wisdom that could secure him all the possible benefits of this and the next world gives place to a powerful impression that man, the prisoner of his inescapable limitations, has no plain and easy choice of wisdom and folly.<sup>19</sup>

The third clue, then, is our uneasiness when we discover the Cock was meant to represent the fool who disregards wisdom, instead of the wise man who knows his own limitations and has a sense of relativity.<sup>20</sup>

I believe the clues would awaken us to the seriousness of the poem if we had enough faith in Henryson as a serious writer to begin with; but perhaps because his name has not been adequately respected readers may have regarded the Rhyme Royal form as indicative only of the poem's antiquity, dismissed the warnings of the "Prologue" as *pro forma*, and judged the "Tale of the Cock and the Jasper" to be a botched job, a fable whose details inadequately prepare the reader for the *Moralitas*. These early promises of high seriousness, however, will be fulfilled by the moral nature of the work as a whole, especially when the reader comes to understand Henryson's structural techniques and their import.

## II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE MORAL FABLES

Although Henryson entitled his work *The Moral Fables of Aesop the Phrygian*, he took only seven of his thirteen fables from Aesopic sources. The other six come from French tales of the Reynardian tradition and from other sources. In the order that they appear in all but

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Several times I have assigned Freshman writing classes the task of deducing a moral from Henryson's "The Tale of the Cock and the Jasper." Not a single student has yet suggested that the Cock might represent a fool, and only a handful have sensed any negative qualities whatever in the portrait.

one of the major manuscripts and early prints, they form a neat symmetry according to source.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 1: The Synthetic Symmetry<sup>22</sup>

Aesopic	—	1) The Cock and the Jasper 2) The Two Mice
Reynardian	—	3) The Cock and the Fox 4) The Confession of the Fox 5) The Trial of the Fox
Aesopic	—	6) The Sheep and the Dog 7) The Lion and the Mouse 8) The Preaching of the Swallow
Reynardian	—	9) The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger 10) The Fox, the Wolf, and the Farmer 11) The Wolf and the Wether
Aesopic	—	12) The Wolf and the Lamb 13) The Paddock and the Mouse

This symmetry is “synthetic” because it cannot be perceived by the reader during the process of reading. By itself it seems relatively unimportant—order for the sake of order; but considered in conjunction with the other symmetries of the poem, this ordering takes on additional significance. For the moment we should note in particular that it leads us to considering the fables in five groupings according to source and that in this regard tales #6 through #8 form the center of the work.

Medieval poets generally considered themselves craftsmen, builders of literary works, and we should therefore never feel safe in imag-

<sup>21</sup> See Howard Henry Roerecke, *The Integrity and Symmetry of Robert Henryson's Moral Fables*, Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 1969. The order differs radically only in the Bannatyne Manuscript. John MacQueen, in his *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford, 1967), has made a carefully reasoned argument in favor of the Bannatyne ordering, but the structural relationships I discuss here convince me of the more commonly accepted order.

<sup>22</sup> The only work I have seen that treats the *Moral Fables* as a structurally integral whole is Howard Henry Roerecke's unpublished dissertation (see note 37 above). I came to many of Professor Roerecke's conclusions independently, and I support nearly all of his findings and conclusions.

ining that any of their perceptible structural devices are meaningless. The very word "poet" means "one who makes something" (from the Greek *poiein*), and the Scots in particular refer to their poets as "makars." Such a hidden structural device might be created in imitation of God's creation of the world, using a divine plan that is imperceptible to the mortals who are living through the experience. The structure of many Medieval and Renaissance works of art reflects this concept of creative order (cf. Spenser's *Epithalamion*).

Closer inspection of the *Moral Fables* reveals yet another kind of symmetry, one complex in detail and pregnant with meaning, which could be called the "climactic" symmetry. It also focuses on tales #6-#8 as the center of the work, but unlike its synthetic counterpart it can be sensed by the reader and must be in order for the reader to experience the moral impact of the work as a whole. This symmetry consists of a linear development which continues throughout the work, crescendoing from the first tale to a climax at the mid-point, tale #7, and then subsiding into a decrescendo until the fictional world disintegrates in the thirteenth and final tale.

The entire development depends upon the special nature of the middle fable, "The Tale of the Lion and the Mouse." This tale is the work's numerical mid-point not only because it is the seventh in a group of thirteen, but also because it is preceded by precisely 200 stanzas and followed by precisely 200 stanzas.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the seventh fable stands out from the others in several striking details: only this fable has its own prologue; only this fable is presented in the form of a Medieval dream-vision; only in this fable do characters actually listen to and follow wholesome advice from others; and only this fable ends happily for all of the central characters. We shall see shortly why these facts are significant.

Looking closely at the progression of the fables before and after the seventh fable, we can see the denouements of Henryson's tales increase in harshness as the work proceeds. In the first six tales (those preceding the central fable), none of the "good" characters suffers any permanent damage. The Cock in #1, the City Mouse in #2, and the Mare in #5 suffer no harm whatever; the Country Mouse in #2 and Chanticleere in #3 undergo ordeals but escape intact; and the Sheep in #6 must suffer through a bitter Winter but may survive to grow another coat of wool. Only the Fox in #5, the Wolf in #5 and the

<sup>23</sup> Roerecke, p. 126.



Fox in #6 suffer severe physical injury or death, and they, being predators and rogues, have earned only their just rewards. For the most part, everyone receives the fate deserved.

In the six tales that follow "The Lion and the Mouse," however, the relatively sympathetic characters suffer increasingly harsher consequences: the Swallow (#8) is saddened and deprived of companionship; the Cadger (#9) is robbed; the Farmer (#10) is badly frightened and must pay a ransom; the Wether (#11) is shaken to death due to his pride; the Lamb (#12) is eaten despite his innocence and humility; and the Mouse (#13) is flayed alive. The evil characters, on the other hand, fare increasingly well: the Wolves progress from being beaten (#9) to being cheated (#10) to being scared but victorious (#11) to being well fed (#12); the Foxes (#9 and #10) succeed in cheating everyone; and the Kite (#13) encounters no resistance whatever in his murderous attack. Thus Henryson gives us a substantially and increasingly grimmer view of life in the second half of the work than in the first, demonstrating that in a deceitful and sinful world good often falls prey to evil.

All this fits into a symmetrical design that emphasizes the progression away from a world wherein frail men are forgiven or punished by a just God, and towards a world which is dominated by evil and powerful men and from which God has withdrawn.

Along with this climactic development we can perceive yet a third kind of symmetry, which can be called the "concentric" symmetry. Again, fable #7 is the focal point, but this time we can consider the tales in parallel groups receding from the center like ripples around a stone dropped in the water. Figure 2 demonstrates this organization.

The first and last tales are isolated as introduction and conclusion. In each the central characters misuse their power of self-determination; the former escapes harm, but the latter does not. Tales #2 and #12 both concern innocent non-predators (the comparatively innocent Country Mouse and the spotless Lamb, both referred to by Henryson as *sillie*), whose sound reasoning is ignored; the former escapes harm, but the latter does not. Moving still towards the center, #3 and #11 both concern proud non-predators who lack the restraint of reason; the former escapes harm, but the latter does not. The obverse situation occurs in #4 and #10, and in #5 and #9. In the earlier tales the Fox, despite his trickery, suffers death; in the later tales the Fox, despite the immorality of his trickery, succeeds.

Figure 2: The Concentric Symmetry

1) Cock and Jasper	introduction	misuse of choice no consequences
2) Two Mice	non-predators	
3) Cock and Fox	escape harm	divine justice and/or intervention
4) Confession of Fox	the Fox is killed	
5) Trial of the Fox		
6) Sheep and Dog	God forsakes man	misuse of reason
7) Lion and Mouse	vision of Utopia	proper use of reason
8) Preaching of Swallow	man forsakes God	misuse of reason
9) Fox, Wolf, and Cadger	the Fox succeeds	
10) Fox, Wolf, and Farmer		human tyranny and lack of divine intervention
11) Wolf and Wether	non-predators	
12) Wolf and Lamb	suffer harm	
13) Paddock and Mouse	conclusion	misuse of choice fatal consequences

This early group (#2–#5), then, pictures a world ruled by divine justice and/or the intervention of Fate:

To se that selie mous, it wes grit sin;  
So desolate and will off ane gude reid;  
For verray dreid scho fell in swoun neir deid.

Bot, as God wald, it fell ane happie cace:  
The spenser had na laser for to byde,  
Nowther to seik nor serche, to char nor chace,  
Bot on he went, and left the dure vp wyde.

It was a great shame to see that poor Mouse, so desolate and lacking good counsel; for very fear she fell into a swoon, near dead.

But as God willed, a fortunate thing occurred: The Steward had no time to stop, neither to seek nor search, neither to frighten nor to chase, but on he went and left the door wide open.

(299-305 - Tale #2)

Then spak the cok, with sum gude spirit inspyrit,  
'Do my counsall and I sall warrand the.'

This tod, thocht he wes fals and friuolus,  
And had frawdiss, his querrell to defend,  
Desauit wes be menis richt meruelous,  
For falsset fail eis ay at the latter end.

Then said the Cock, inspired by some good spirit, "Do as I advise, and I shall guarantee you success."

This Fox, though he was false and not to be trusted, and had tricks enough to help him out of a corner, was himself deceived by means most miraculous; for falseness always will fail in the end.

(558-9, 565-8 - Tale #3)

The later group (#9-#12) pictures a world untouched by divine presence and ruled by human tyranny:

The foxe beheld that seruice quhair he lay,  
And leuch on loft quhen he the volff sa seis,  
Baith deif and dosinnit, fall swonand on his kneis.

The fox observed this happen from where he lay, and laughed aloud when thus he saw the Wolf, both deaf and dazed, fall swooning to his knees.

(2186-8 - Tale #9)

'Ha,' quod the volff, 'thou wald intruse ressoun  
Quhair wrang and reif suld duell in propertie.  
That is ane poynt and part of fals tressoun,  
For to gar reuth remane with crueltie.  
Be Goddis woundis, fals tratour, thou sail de  
For thy trespas, and for thy fatheris als'.  
With that anone he hint him be the hals.

The seli lamb culd do na thing bot bleit:  
Sone wes he hedit; the volff wald do na grace;

"Aha," (said the Wolf), "you would be inserting reason where villainy and ill-doing should rightly rule. That is an example and instance of false treason, to try to make compassion abide with cruelty. By God's wounds, lying traitor,

you shall die for your misdeed, and for your father's, too." With that, at once he grabbed him by the neck.

The innocent Lamb could do nothing but bleat; quickly he was dead. The Wolf would grant him no grace;

(2693-701 - Tale #12)

We therefore have three different conscious arrangements—synthetic, climactic, and concentric—all of which point to tales #6–#8 as forming the core of the work and marking its turning point. The central vision of human justice (#7) is surrounded by the tale of the innocent Sheep who can find no justice (#6) and the tale of the proud flock of birds who ignore wisdom and suffer an unhappy end in which justice is no longer a question (#8).

In tale #6 the Sheep laments the lack of divine intervention in his world:

Quaikand for cauld, sair murnand ay amang,  
Kest vp his ee vnto the heuinnis hicht,  
And said, "O lord, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?  
Walk, and discerne my cause groundit on richt;  
Se how I am be fraud, maistrie, and slicht  
Peillit full bair, and so is mony one  
Now in this warld richt wonder wo begone.

Shivering from the cold, lamenting sorely all the while, he cast his eyes up to the heights of heaven and said: "Lord God, why sleep you so long? Awake, and pass judgment on my cause, which is founded on truth; see how I by fraud, corruption, and deception, am stripped full bare;" and so is many a one in this world now, plagued in the extreme.

(1293-9)

The world literally has been God-forsaken. In the central tale, #7, Henryson demonstrates that we could still survive, even without divine intervention, if we only would listen to reason. The Lion, Lord of beasts, literally "awakes and passes judgment" on the Mouse's cause, tempering his personal sense of outrage with reason and open-handed justice:

Quhen this wes said, the lyoun his language  
Paissit, and thocht according to ressoun,  
And gart mercie his cruell ire asswage,  
And to the mous grantit remissioun,  
Oppinnit his pow, and scho on kneis fell down,

And baith hir handis vnto the heuin vpheild,  
Cryand, 'Almichty God mot 3ow for3eild!'

When this was said, the Lion reconsidered his words and let reason rule his thinking, and let mercy assuage his cruel anger, and he granted the Mouse remission. He opened his paw, and she fell down on her knees, and both her hands she held up to heaven, crying "May almighty God requite you!"

(1503-9)

Henryson follows this fable with "The Preaching of the Swallow," which demonstrates by contrast what happens in a God-forsaken world when we do not listen to reason, when we abandon righteous teachings.

Allace, it wes grit hart sair for to se  
That bludie bowcheour beit thay birdis doun,  
And for till heir, quhen thay wist weill to de,  
Thair cairfull sang and lamentatioun.  
Sum with ane staf he straik to irth on swoun,  
Off sum the heid, off sum he brak the crag,  
Sum half on lyfe he stoppit in his bag.

Alas, it made the heart lament to see that bloody Butcher beating down those birds, and to hear their woeful song and lamentation when they knew well they were about to die. Some with a club he struck to the earth unconscious; he beat the head of some, he broke the neck of others, and some he stuffed into his bag half-dead.

(1874-80)

Henryson uses the symbol of the net to represent human disaster. The Lion is able to escape the hunters' net because his previous use of reason had gained him allies who could bite the cords; but the birds of the following fable are caught fast in the fowler's net because of their having ignored reason beforehand.

The solidity of complex structures of the *Moral Fables* depends to a great extent upon the ability of the central fable to support the weight of its central position and function. In its unique prologue, the narrator walks out into the beautiful fields (representing perhaps the natural goodness of the God-given world), falls asleep, and has a dream-vision. Aesop appears, and after complaining that holy preaching no longer has any effect, consents to tell the following tale. A Mouse, having been captured by a Lion whom he had awakened from a deep sleep, forcefully and intelligently pleads to be released. The Lion is convinced by the Mouse's reasoning and therefore sets him at lib-

erty. Later, when the Lion has been entrapped by villagers' nets, the Mouse summons other mice, frees the Lion, and all happily go on their ways. The narrator then awakens and returns home.

The importance of this tale (and only this tale's) being a dream-vision cannot be underestimated. Nicolai von Kreisler has explained well the general significance of the dream-vision and has suggested its effect on Henryson's fable:

Abundantly reinforced in the Middle Ages in scriptural and secular writing, the tradition that fostered these strategies was, stated simply, that the most valuable of the ways a man knows truth are the dreams, visions, trances, swoons, ravishings, and ecstasies wherein his soul frees itself from the operation of his body and apprehends truth directly and insensibly, as if it had flown to its own inimitable and immaterial realms. . . . In identifying "The Lion and the Mouse" as a dream-vision, therefore, Henryson sought at once to objectify this lesson and to invest it with greater authority than the fabulist ordinarily enjoyed. Specifically, in signifying that his lesson derived from the divine inspiration of the visionary as well as the fabulist's keen worldly observation, Henryson added force to his allegory, for his unmistakable implication was that if "figures" were sensible embodiments or personifications of the truth one could know from the soul's dream-flight as well as symbols of the universal truths knowable in the material world.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, von Kreisler goes on to conclude that all this special emphasis "almost certainly finds explanation in the political implications of his narrative," turning the *Moral Fables* into an allegory of the misrule of James III, and little more. We can see, however, from the effect that the structure of the work has on its meaning, that the significance of the dream-vision reached much further. It gives us Henryson's Utopian vision, presentable only as a dream: a world wherein men listen to each other, allow themselves to be swayed by reason, justice, and mercy, and remember their debts to each other with gratitude. It is a glorious world, in which the Lion can lie down with the Mouse; but unfortunately, it is only a dream, and at its end we must awake and return to the real world.

To underscore this, Henryson repeats the process with significant alterations in the following tale, "The Preaching of the Swallow." There the narrator also walks out into the beautiful fields, but this time he remains awake. Again he sees characters reasoning with each other, but in this non-dream world the Swallow's logic is ridiculed

<sup>24</sup> Nicolai von Kreisler, pp. 393, 395.

and ignored. As a result, the other birds must suffer a bloody death, described in the harshest detail of the work to that point (see 1874-80, quoted above).

The introductory stanzas to "The Preaching of the Swallow" turn the reader's attention, at great length, to the presence of a universal order, filled with the beneficence of nature and great promises of personal fulfillment and fruitfulness. Throughout it, as Denton Fox has pointed out, there is "a sturdy progression towards the natural world of the birds in the fable: the movement is from God to nature, from eternal stability to seasonal mutability, from abstract to general philosophy to concrete specific experience,"<sup>25</sup> leading, I would add, from the world of the dream-vision back towards a world of a most bitter wakefulness. At the beginning of the tale the narrator's visual experience still sounds like the dream-vision of the tale that has just ended; "mouing thusgait, grit myrth I take in mynd, / Off lauboraris to se the besines. . . . In hart gritlie reiosit off that sicht" ("As I wandered thus, I was overjoyed to see the industry of the laborers. . . . My heart greatly rejoicing in that sight") (1720-1, 1728); but by end, sight has become painful: "Allace, it was grit hart sair for to se / that bludie bowcheour beit thay birdis down" ("Alas, it made my heart lament to see that bloody Butcher beating down those birds" (1874-5).

Henryson also makes the transition from the dream world back to the real one in terms of the natural progression of the four seasons, describing two complete cycles<sup>26</sup>: in introducing the tale of the Swallow he begins with Summer (1678) and ends with Spring (1706), but the action of the tale begins in Spring (1713) and ends in Winter (1832). The Summer to Spring cycle suggests a spirit of renewal of a continuing, vigorous, hopeful life; such is the atmosphere of the beginning of this fable, as if the aura of the previous tale had not yet worn off. The Spring to Winter cycle suggests quite the opposite, a dispirited sense of woeful inevitability, a linear progression ending in death, instead of the circular progression ending in renewal of life; such is the "reality" of the world of the Swallow.

Aesop's complaint seems to have been justified: the Swallow's holy preaching had no effect. Henryson never allows the shock of this return from Utopia to die away, and he constantly increases the harshness of the tales' outcomes, saving the most hideous for last.

<sup>25</sup> Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," *ELH*, XXIX (1962), 350.

<sup>26</sup> George Clark, 13.

Blindness, appetite, and the ignoring of reason have so completely taken over by then that Henryson dares put the good advice into the mouth of the very character who ignores it. The Mouse recognizes that the frightening physiognomy of the Paddock bodes ill for any alliance between them (2819–32), and even listens to the Paddock decry silken tongues that disguise deceit (2848–50); yet still she allows her appetite to overwhelm her good sense, which results in a most grisly death for her. When the Kite comes to destroy them both, we view an image in little of this world's day of destruction: the Kite (who represents death, we are told in the *Moralitas*) pulls the skin of his victims (who represent the body and the soul) over their heads in one deft motion (*bellieflaucht full fettilie* in Middle Scots), suggesting the ultimate in thoroughness and cold-bloodedness.

Taken individually, these fables most impress the reader with their charm and humor, with their isolated moments of insight into character, and with their technical grace; but when they are viewed in the context of the complex structure of the work as a whole, they have a strikingly different impact. The whole in this case is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. The three symmetries—the synthetic, the climactic, and the concentric—function simultaneously, each with a different effect on the reader, and each making a different contribution to meaning.

#### The synthetic symmetry

The alternations of Aesopic and Reynardian fables can neither be sensed nor “used” by the reader. They represent mere order, order as a given of the universe, describable neither as static nor dynamic because it is imperceptible. Such an expression of order is symbolic of God's divine plan, to which Henryson pays tribute: “Till understand it is aneuch, I wis, / That God in all his werkis wittie is” (It is enough to understand, I know, that God has a purpose for each of His works) (1662–3).

#### The climactic symmetry

The crescendo climaxing in the central fable and disintegrating thereafter may be both sensed and used by the reader. It symbolizes order as a moral force, describable as dynamic because it is available only through the dynamic reading process. It warns directly of worldly dangers and leads through its ups and downs to an ending of worldly despair.



## The concentric symmetry

The "ripples" of concentricity can hardly be sensed by the reader, but can be used. They symbolize order as a moral force, describable as static because of the distance, perspective, and careful investigation necessary to perceive it, available only in the static experience of viewing the whole in retrospect. It suggests the possibility of discovering patterns in life, but hints that this knowledge may come too late.

The tension between despair over the future and amusement in the details of the present gives Henryson's work its intriguing quality of restlessness. With the exception of the central dream vision, the world of the *Moral Fables* is not a happy one, despite the elegance of the art and the persistence of the humor. As the work progresses, the world of deadly sins, with sadness overcoming joy and depravity overcoming innocence, increasingly dominates. It is filled with persecution, suffering, irresponsible trickery, studied injustice, and sheer gratuitous malevolence. Some moral indictment is levelled at all the characters except the Sheep, the Swallow, and the Lamb, who instead are subjected to some of the harshest fates in the *Moral Fables*. In each tale but the central one, an animal either is called to obey reason but ignores it, or tries to follow reason but is prevented. The work as a whole charts a progression of increasing frustration that finally reposes in despair. We move from the admonition to seek out wisdom (in "The Cock and the Jasper") through the discovery of Utopia (in "The Lion and the Mouse") to the finality of universal destruction (in "The Paddock and the Mouse") and we find that Henryson has suggested *through his structure* the common Medieval resolution to the human predicament, the same resolution that he makes explicit in the complaint of the Sheep in tale #6.

'Seis thow not, lord, this warld ouerturnit is,  
As quha wald change gude gold in leid or tyn?  
The pure is peillit, the lord may do na mis,  
And simonie is haldin for na syn.  
Now is he blyith with okker maist may wyn;  
Gentrice is slane, and pietie is ago.  
Allace, gude lord, quhy tholis thow it so?

'Thow tholis this euin for our grit offence;  
Thow sendis vs troubill and plaigis soir,  
As hunger, derth, grit weir, or pestilence;

Bot few amendis now thair lyfe thairfoir.  
We pure pepill as now may do no moir  
Bot pray to the: se that we ar opprest  
In to this eirth, grant vs in heuin gude rest.'

"Lord, do you not see this world is thrown into chaos, just as some would change pure gold into lead or tin; the poor man is stripped bare, but the great man can do no wrong; and Simony is considered no sin. Now he considers himself the happiest who can win the greatest profit by extortion; kindness is slain, and pity is a thing of the past; alas, good Lord, why do You suffer it to be so?

You suffer this even for our great offense; You send us troubles and sore plagues, as hunger, dearth, great war, and pestilence; and yet this causes few to mend their way of living. We poor people, as of now, may do no more than pray to Thee; since on this earth we are so oppressed, in heaven may God grant us rest."

(1307–20)

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# The Responsibilities of Madness: John Skelton, "Speke, Parrot," and Homeopathic Satire

by Nathaniel Owen Wallace

ne taceas neque conpescaris Deus  
quoniam ecce inimici tui sonaverunt<sup>1</sup>  
Psalm 82 (Vulgate)

## I

SKELTON'S Parrot is mad. His torrential verbiage, obscure digressions, and rapid transitions strongly convey such an impression. The bird himself declares that, since "mesure is treasure" (62), one should be "*ne tropo sanno, ne tropo mato*" (63), "neither too sane, nor too mad."<sup>2</sup> Parrot is thus partially out of his senses, but he asserts that madness possesses the world he mimics and denounces. Critics of the poem have on several occasions commented in passing upon the confusion and disorder from which Parrot is protected by his cage. I maintain, however, that the attack on madness is not simply one aspect of the poem; rather, madness is the central vice at which the satire takes aim and from which arise all other follies or vices referred to in the poem.<sup>3</sup> According to Parrot,

<sup>1</sup> "May you not be silent nor may you be restrained, God,  
Since, behold, your enemies have raised a sound."

See also below, note 30. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from "Speke, Parrot" are from the edition of Robert S. Kinsman in John Skelton, *Poems* (Oxford, 1969). I have also found Kinsman's notes useful in a number of instances.

<sup>3</sup> For references to the disordered world presented in the satire and to madness as one object of attack, see for instance A. R. Heiserman, *Skelton and Satire* (Chicago, 1961), especially pp. 141 and 145.

Cardinal Wolsey, the arch-villain of the satire, is mad; as a result, he fosters a multitude of social and political evils. "Speke, Parrot" therefore has a clearly discernible moral focus: an insane bird rails at a chaotic, thoroughly demented world.<sup>4</sup>

Since Skelton would cure a noxious malady by exposing the sickness to what is similar to it, I think it is useful to call "Speke, Parrot" a "homeopathic satire."<sup>5</sup> As the poem progresses, Skelton sketches the outlines of two kinds of madness: the frenzied behavior of Wolsey and those influenced or infected by him on the one hand, and Parrot's ecstatic storms of invective on the other. During the course of the poem, it also becomes evident that the satire can work as a remedy for madness in two ways. First, Parrot will shock his wayward readers, make them realize through exposure to chaotic language that they themselves are erratic. At the same time, Parrot will ward off madness. He will use his own divine madness to charm and drive out of the kingdom the insanity oppressing it. For Parrot is hardly an ordinary fowl. Scrutiny of the eighty-second psalm will show that he is a parodic representation of the Holy Ghost. In "Speke, Parrot," Skelton resorts to eccentric and excessive literary techniques to rid England of madness.

"Speke, Parrot" is undoubtedly difficult and for over four centuries has baffled its readers, both those Tudor personages implicated in the satire as well as those modern commentators presumably free of the vice Parrot rails against. Yet the text becomes less baffling through close reading as well as through pursuing carefully the allusions by which Parrot would seem casually to summon up other texts. In this satire, Skelton reveals a fondness for loaded allusion, a technique by which the work referred to, if read thoroughly, provides commentary on or indicates something significant about the main text. Several detailed discussions have in recent decades helped elucidate numerous difficulties associated with "Speke, Parrot," but they have not

<sup>4</sup> I am unable to agree with Stanley Fish that the poem's moral focus cannot be ascertained. For his view, see S. E. Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry* (New Haven, 1965), p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> Students of sixteenth-century satire are familiar with Mary Claire Randolph's article, "The Medical Concept in English Renaissance Satiric Theory," *SP*, XXXVIII (April, 1941), 125-57. As Randolph points out, "To the Renaissance critic and satirist, satire is a scourge, a whip, a surgeon's scalpel, a cauterizing iron, a strong cathartic. . . ; and the satirist himself is a whipper, a scourger, a barber-surgeon, an executioner, a 'doctor of physik'" (p. 125). Such forms of treatment are properly called heteropathic or allopathic, for they aim to cure through action contrary to the nature of the disease. The present paper explores the idea that the analogy between satire and medicine can be expressed in still another way.

examined fully some of the texts alluded to. Also, they have tended to preserve a serious instance of misreading, first advanced by Arthur Koelbing, who mistakenly held that lines 50-4 present the central theme of the poem.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many quite meaningful lines have been overlooked. The following discussion is an effort to demonstrate the importance of a number of neglected passages and to provide a fresh interpretation of the poem's basic satiric strategies.

## II

During the reign of Henry VIII, Thomas Wolsey at the same time held the posts of archbishop, cardinal, legate *a latere*, and lord chancellor. In addition, he vigorously but unsuccessfully endeavored to secure his own election as pope. As Henry's most powerful administrator and most influential advisor, he was sometimes thought to have more power than the king himself. Wolsey's authority was substantial in the Church, in domestic finance, and in foreign policy. His administrative work was on some occasions carried out efficiently; at other times, his negotiations were tediously long, costly, and ineffectual. Many individuals chafed under the burden of his policies, especially those who, such as Skelton, had been associates of Henry from his youth and early kingship, and who held traditional views with regard to the Church, education, and the workings of the state.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever else might be held against Wolsey, there is no historical evidence that he was insane. Skelton shows cleverness and brilliance in using madness as a satiric fiction by means of which to attack the Cardinal. It is probable that the poet wished in part to warn his king and former pupil<sup>8</sup> of the dangers of Wolsey's continued exercise of his enormous power. When the bird boasts,

In Englysshe to God Parott can supple:  
'Cryste save Kyng Herry the viii<sup>th</sup>, owur royalle kyng,'  
(33-4)

<sup>6</sup> See below, note 12.

<sup>7</sup> For a useful account of Wolsey, see J. D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485-1558* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 286-334.

<sup>8</sup> In 1499, Erasmus saluted Skelton as an able tutor of the young prince. In the "Poems against Carnesche," Skelton praised his own efforts in this regard. See P. S. Allen, ed. *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami* (Oxford, 1906), I, 241, and Alexander Dyce, ed. *The Poetical Works of John Skelton* (London, 1843), I, 129, lines 94-105.

he does not utter a mechanical formula; rather, his words show a concern, emphasized in the satire, that Skelton no doubt felt in actual life for the welfare of the state. The warning to Henry was completed late in 1521 or early in 1522 and attacks Wolsey with a myriad of verbal techniques, but stops just short of naming him directly.<sup>9</sup>

Parrot first hints at the program of the satire through an allusion to Horace:

*Vis consilii expers, as techythe me Orace,  
Mole ruit sua, whose dictes ar pregaunte.*  
(40-1)

"Power without prudence is ruined by its own might," asserts Horace. The quotation is a familiar line from a celebrated ode, *Carmina* III.4.65. The line begins a stanza that summarizes the ode's central idea: Horace's belief that a temperate Augustus will remain prosperous and victorious. An analogy is clearly implied between Augustus and Henry VIII. Skelton underscores the significance of the allusion in a marginal comment: "*Hic lege Flaccum et obserua plantatum diabolum.*" "Read Horace and find a devil ensconced." Skelton thus refers to the mythological characters, such as the Titans and Orion, mentioned elsewhere in the ode and doomed as a result of their own insolence. Certainly, Henry would wish to avoid such a fate even if Wolsey, the ensconced devil, should deserve one.

"*Consilium*," which Parrot finds lacking, can be translated as prudence, consultation, judgment, or understanding. It is possible that lines 40-1 also refer to Wolsey's poor handling of negotiations between Charles V and Francis I while Turkish forces pushed westward to threaten all of Christian Europe.<sup>10</sup> In any case, the absence of "*consilium*" not only indicates pursuit of impractical plans but also suggests a lack of sound intellect.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the dating of the poem, see William Nelson, *John Skelton, Laureate* (New York, 1939), pp. 161-5. Nelson's commentary established the period of composition of "Speke, Parrot" as falling primarily in 1521 and made possible intelligent interpretation of the numerous biblical and other references in the satire. An early study by John M. Berdan was unsuccessful, because the author held that the satire was composed between October, 1517, and November, 1518, and thus referred to events of that period. See J. M. Berdan, "Speke, Parrot. An Interpretation of Skelton's Satire," *MLN*, XXX (1915), 140-4.

For further discussion of the dates of various parts of the poem, see F. W. Brownlow, "The Boke Compiled by Maister Skelton, Poet Laureate, Called Speake Parrot," *ELR*, I (1971), 7-8 and note 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Heiserman, p. 132.

Parrot is quick to refer to madness in unmistakable terms; he thus introduces the argument of the poem:

Now *pandes mory*, wax frantycke som men sey;  
Phronessys for frenessys may not holde her way.  
(46-7)

The second line lays bare the central principle from which the satire develops: "Good judgment, because of frenzy, cannot hold its course." The maxim is shrouded beneath what Skelton calls in the rubric to line 47 an "incomprehensible pun" ("*paronomasia certe incomprehensibilis*"). The pun is incomprehensible first of all because Skelton resorts to Greek terms, no doubt obscure to many of his readers, to make his point. More important, however, is the fact that his marginal comment is itself a pun: the pun in line 47, according to the rubric, refers to irrational or incomprehensible aspects of life in Henry VIII's kingdom.

Almost every facet of the satire is encumbered with difficulties, but once the pun is deciphered, the role of madness begins to emerge. "Frenessys" rules the realm, for Wolsey, Henry's too powerful advisor, is frenzied, mad, delirious. Therefore, why shouldn't everyone display symptoms and tendencies of madness? Line 46 advocates just that through the imperative, "wax frantycke."<sup>11</sup>

Although the next stanza has been thought to initiate the main attack of the satire,<sup>12</sup> the significance of these verses should be considered in perspective. Certainly several of the lines are very meaningful:

*Moderata iuvant* but *toto dothe* exede;  
*Dyscrecion ys* modyr of nobylle vertues alle;  
*Myden agan* in Grekys tonge we rede,

<sup>11</sup> The phrase "*pandes mory*," (46), has been variously interpreted but remains obscure. Its probable meaning, from Middle French "*pander*" and "*moric*," is "Set death as a wager," which is to say, "You can bet your life on this!" Parrot has just announced that he can speak many languages; now he demonstrates his knowledge by uttering the French phrase. Next, he reports, in typically disconnected fashion, the words of unidentified persons who say, "Wax frantic." So the whole line can be paraphrased as, "Now you can be sure of this, some people are saying that we should all wax frantic."

<sup>12</sup> See Arthur Koelbing, *Zur Charakteristik John Skeltons* (Stuttgart, 1904), pp. 125-6; H. L. R. Edwards, *Skelton: The Life and Times of an Early Tudor Poet* (London, 1949), p. 185; Heiserman, pp. 132-3; and David Lawton, "Skelton's Use of *Persona*," *EIC*, XXX (1980), 21.

But reason and wytte wantythe theyr provyncialle,  
When wylfulnes ys vicar generale.

(50-4)

However, although these lines define what is wrong with Henry's realm, to a greater extent they point out the contrary of the pervasive vice: pursuit of the golden mean is the opposite of Wolsey's uncontrolled, unmeasured, and insane maneuvering. The first three of these lines advance the positive value, the exhortation to virtue, that satire typically presents for the reader's edification and that is infrequently seen among the detailed descriptions of vice that commonly make up the bulk of a satirical text.<sup>13</sup>

Lines 53-4, rather than marking the first piercing thrust at the source of contemporary ills, provide a variation on the great theme that has already been advanced, "Phronessys for frenessys may not holde her way." Parrot exclaims that reason and wit are not well regulated and that willfulness rules all. He thus depicts a state of mental imbalance. Lines 53-4 also insinuate that Wolsey's power has become excessive and is abused. Since Wolsey is Henry's chief advisor and is out of his senses, his madness affects society at large.

Parrot quickly provides an illustration of how a sane person can be afflicted with madness:

*Vitulus* in Oreb troubled Arons brayne.

(59)

In all likelihood, Wolsey, a butcher's son, is referred to by "*vitulus*," meaning "calf." And Henry VIII is analogous to Aaron, who offered Moses an irrational explanation as to why the Golden Calf had been constructed while the prophet was on Mt. Sinai.<sup>14</sup> Wolsey is thus able to induce mental unrest in those around him.

The Cardinal's madness is also singled out for censure later in the poem. For almost a hundred lines (278-373), Parrot is replaced as speaker by Skelton himself, who sends forth a series of four envoys. As he speaks in his own voice, Skelton reinforces some of the points made by Parrot against Wolsey and about various aspects of insanity in the previous sections of the satire.

<sup>13</sup> On this point see Mary Claire Randolph, "The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire," *PQ*, XXI (1942), 368-84. See also Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> See Heiserman, p. 137.



The "Secunde Lenuoy" begins with some rather direct attacks on Wolsey (lines 301-14). Skelton remarks,

For Jerico and Jerssey shali mete togethyr as sone  
As he to exployte the man owte of the mone.  
(306-7)

As is typical in the later stanzas of "Speke, Parrot," a proverb expresses an absurd and impossible enterprise. Jericho and Jersey, perhaps, represent the irreconcilable positions of Charles V and Francis I, which Wolsey foolishly contrives to harmonize.<sup>15</sup>

In "Le dereyn lenveoy" Skelton again denounces Wolsey's instability and the impracticality of his efforts:

For he wantythe of hys wyttes that all wold rule alone;  
Hyt ys no lytyll bordon to bere a grete mylle stone.  
(329-30)

Lines 331-3 present a series of absurd undertakings, with the conclusion:

To suche thynges ympossybyll, reason cannot consente.  
(334)

It is insane, the poet insists, for a man to attempt what the limitations of his nature will not permit him to accomplish.

Related to the attacks on Wolsey's madness are those on aberrant intellect elsewhere in "Speke, Parrot." At one point about a third of the way through the poem, Parrot reminds the reader of his main theme:

Set *Sophia* asyde, for every Jack Raker  
And every mad medier must now be a maker.  
(160-1)

Wisdom is juxtaposed to madness. Discretion and moderation have been abandoned. Parrot charges. The context, a spirited denunciation of current developments in education, suggests that every busybody strives to arbitrate in matters of rhetoric.

In the envoys, Skelton vituperates in part against those disapproving readers of the poem who have cast aspersions on Parrot. The exposure of the audience to satiric attack indicates that previous sec-

<sup>15</sup> Kinsman, p. 175n.

tions of the satire had already been read and commented on when the envoys were composed. In "Lenvoy primere," Skelton reassures Parrot that the bird's detractors are "folys" (292), and "lewldye ar they lettyrde" (294); they are learned, but in a perverse or mischievous way. In the "Secunde Lenuoy," Skelton repeats his defense of Parrot as he continues to attack those who contemn the bird. Only those "of smalle intellygens" (318) will disparage Parrot, because

To rude ys there reason to reche to your sentence.  
(319)

In this instance, Skelton emphasizes the stupidity of the bird's critics. In the last of the envoys, "Lenvoy royalle," the poet refers to his main theme with no ambiguity. He bluntly informs Parrot,

your remorde(r)s ar madde or else starke blynde.  
(369)

Thus Skelton dismisses the bird's detractors.

The attacks on the audience in the envoys do not indicate a shift in the direction of Skelton's satire. Rather, the old vice of madness has now been pilloried in a different guise. Also, Cardinal Wolsey himself may well have been one of the readers and critics of early segments of "Speke, Parrot." So the attack on the audience is probably also an attack on Wolsey. The envoys find Skelton, speaking in his own voice, continuing to pursue the satiric goals enunciated by Parrot early in the poem.

When Parrot returns to speak in his own defense, he displays augmented fervor and enthusiasm:

Helas! I lamente the dull abuyssd brayne,  
The enfatuate fantasies, the wytles wyfulnes  
Of on and hothyr at me that have dysdayne.  
(383-5)

In harsh and blatant terms, he attacks the madness of his critics. But their madness is only part of the general madness that is destroying the kingdom, and when the bird directs his words against this pervasive ill, he speaks with undiminished ferocity and clarity:

Frantiknes dothe rule and alle thyng commaunde;  
Wyfulnes and Braynles no(w) rule all the raye.  
Agayne Frentike Frenesy there dar no man sey nay,

For Frantiknes and Wylfulnes and Braynles ensembylle,  
 The nebbis of a lyon they make to trete and trembylle.  
 (420-4)

Thus, Parrot again hands down the indictment of lines 45-6:

Now *pandes mory*, wax frantycke som men sey;  
 Phronessys for frenessys may not holde her way.

With the use of such words as "frantiknes" and "frenesy" in lines 420-3, Parrot firmly binds together various sections of his attack and underscores the thematic core of the poem: Henry's realm is being overthrown by madness, and the ruler becomes ruled.<sup>16</sup> Although Skelton apparently composed "Speke, Parrot" in a number of stages over a period of at least several months, a consistent central purpose seems to have been his concern at all times.

### III

Skelton uses the fiction of madness adroitly, depicting the kingdom as discolored by the lurid tints of derangement. His cascades of invective are verbally dexterous and original, but the notion that he exploits, the idea that the satiric *alazon* is a madman, is quite old. To gain a further understanding of Skelton's satiric strategies, his debt to Persius must be examined.

There are several allusions in "Speke, Parrot" to the Roman satirist Persius, and their frequency suggests that they bear significance. First the evidence: Persius is undoubtedly one source of Skelton's bird, for Parrot names the Latin satirist and quotes a line from the brief prologue to his satires:

Percyus, that poete, dothe reporte of me,  
*Quis expediuit psitaco suum Chyre?*  
 (27-8)<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The significance of lines 420ff. has been recognized, and their relationship to earlier sections of the satire has been noted by Edvige Schulte, *La poesia di John Skelton* (Napoli, 1963), p. 143. But Schulte refers to lines 53-4 as the precedent to the attack in 420-2. Lines 53-4, as discussed above, have incorrectly been viewed as presenting the argument of the satire.

<sup>17</sup> "Who taught the parrot to say hello?" Parrot here quotes line 8 of Persius' prologue.

There is an allusion to Persius in line 339, when in "Le dereyn lenveoy," Skelton throws out a Latin phrase, "*non sine postica sanna*," which means "not without a smirking glance pursuing him." This phrase echoes Persius i.62, "*posticae occurrite sannae*"; "confront the smirking face behind you."<sup>18</sup> Persius is mentioned by name once more in line 373. These references affirm that Skelton had some familiarity with the satires of Persius.

Moreover, one can conclude that Skelton not only knew Persius but found aspects of his style worthy of emulation. In Persius are found recondite allusions, rapid transitions, compressed dicta, convoluted tropes, and a sense of urgent need to censure vice. In his third satire especially, Persius presents sin as a form of sickness:

non pudet ad morem discincti uiuere Nattae.  
sed stupet hic uitio et fibris increuit opimum  
pingue, caret culpa, nescit quid perdat, et alto  
demersus summa rursus non bullit in unda.  
(31-4)<sup>19</sup>

Isn't it shameful to live in the manner of dissolute Natta?  
But this man is struck senseless with vice, and  
Abundant fat grows over his heart. He has no guilt.  
Nor does he know what he may lose. And having sunk deeply,  
He sends no bubbles back to the surface.

Persius provides a vivid image of a man whose senses have been numbed by the disease of sin, who drowns in his own vice. The attention to lifelike detail and the concision of expression recall some of Skelton's epigrammatic attacks on folly and vice.

In denouncing sin, Persius refers explicitly to disease in lines 63-4. A mature friend advises a wayward young man:

elleborum frustra, cum iam cutis aegra tumebit  
poscentis uideas; uenienti occurrite morbo.

You should see that you ask for hellebore in vain  
When your skin is now sick and swells; attack the disease  
As it comes on.

<sup>18</sup> Persius' use of the phrase is cited in the Lewis and Short Latin dictionary under "*sanna*."

<sup>19</sup> Quotations of Persius are from the edition of W. V. Clausen, *A. Persi Flacci Saturarum Liber* (Oxford, 1956).

Persius links sin not merely to disease but to mental sickness in particular with the mention of hellebore, a drug widely used in antiquity for the treatment of insanity. At the close of Satire 3, the young man is criticized by his interlocutor, because on some occasions,

ira  
scintillant oculi, dicisque facisque quod ipse  
non sani esse hominis non sanus iuret Orestes.  
(116-18)

your eyes  
Flash with anger, and you say and do what  
Insane Orestes would swear were expressions of insanity.

Persius' use of mental disease reflects the Stoic view that moral transgressions and madness are closely linked. Within the Stoic framework, only the Stoic sage was considered truly sane.<sup>20</sup> Excessive, insolent, or otherwise immoral actions were held to indicate an unsound mind.

Though not a Stoic, Skelton recognized a valuable concept. His treatment of the theme of madness resembles what is found in Persius. Skelton surely read Persius, and in Satire 3, he would have encountered a brilliant rejection of the sickness of a sinful life. Also, Persius' complex and difficult style would seem to be one source of Skelton's expertness in verbal manipulation. There are many similarities between the two writers, although any borrowing by Skelton from Persius does not extend to imitation of an entire program of satiric attack.

#### IV

Skelton's satire is reminiscent of the Stoic notion that everyone is mad except the sage—but Parrot does not qualify as a Stoic sage. For Parrot is himself mad, and his tangled eloquence corrects vice

<sup>20</sup> This idea was often referred to by Roman writers. Skelton found it implied in Persius 3, but he could also have encountered it in Cicero, who states it in the form, "Omne stultum insanire"; "Every fool is insane" (*Paradoxa Stoicorum*, IV). In Satire II.3.43-6, Horace presents with some irony the notion that only the wise man is sane. If Skelton read either of these latter two texts, he would have again seen wrongdoing associated with madness.

Insightful comments on Persius' relation to Stoicism are provided by Michael Coffey in *Roman Satire* (London, 1976), p. 111.

more through a homeopathic exposure of madness to madness than through direct censure. The bird's insanity is first implied by the command "wax frantycke" (46); certainly Parrot should be suspected of having obeyed the injunction that he himself reports. Additional evidence appears when Parrot announces,

To wyse is no vertue, to medelyng, to restles;  
 In mesure is tresure, cum *sensu maturato*:  
*Ne tropo sanno, ne tropo mato.*

(61-3)

In affirming moderation as an ideal, Parrot advances a surprisingly imaginative view of mature intellect: one should be neither too sane, nor too mad. It is clear that Parrot does not merely *feign* insanity in order to fend off punishment for making overly bold comments about politics. Rather, he *is* to some extent insane. Yet this madness is born of a wisdom that does not strive for utter consistency in all things, nor does it attempt to fabricate elaborate and carefully planned but maniacal schemes.

Parrot's madness and, paradoxically, his wisdom are established.<sup>21</sup> His madness is opposed to Wolsey's, and the two forms of mental derangement crop up later in the satire. The bird's aberration springs from a "ripened understanding" ("*sensu maturato*"), which recognizes that some waywardness is healthy. Wolsey's madness has as its source a willful and sick craving for influence and authority. Parrot's instability serves, then, to counterbalance a malignant element within Henry's kingdom.

Comments by the audience serve as clues to Parrot's inner state. The bird's speech becomes so drunken and opaque as he rails at the evils of England that an unidentified interlocutor protests:

'Peace, Parrot, ye prate as ye were *ebrius*!'  
 (68)

The accusation that Parrot appears inebriated underscores the fact that his enthusiastic nature produces disjointed discourse. Later, in "Lenvoy primere," Skelton reassures Parrot that those people are wrong who claim that the bird's infrequently interrupted monologues "hang togedyr as fethyrs in the wynde" (293). Yet as he de-

<sup>21</sup> Parrot's wisdom has been discussed by Nelson, Heiserman, and by Brownlow, pp. 10-11.

fends Parrot, the author points out that incoherence is a possible interpretation of the bird's speech. By using the proverbial expression "fethyrs in the wind,"<sup>22</sup> Skelton seems to invite such an interpretation.

Parrot's madness is further manifested when he discloses a need to calm his agitated emotions:

Now a nutmeg, a nutmeg, *cum gariopholo,*  
 For Parrot to pyke upon, his brayne for to stable.  
 Swete synamum styckis and *pleris cum musco!*  
 (183-5)

Parrot here explicitly states that his brain is unstable. The context is an attack on contemporary educational reforms; his madness, apparently, is in part a response to what he perceives as the disorder of the world nowadays. The items Parrot names—nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, and musk—were regarded in Skelton's day as reliable treatments for mental unrest.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, they are all found in greatest abundance in the vicinity of India, where the bird claims (4) to have spent much of his life. Parrot seeks familiar and appropriate remedies to relieve his emotional turmoil.

The next two stanzas help to clarify further the nature of the bird's madness:

The myrroure that I tote in, *quasi diaphanum,* 190  
*Vel quasi speculum, in enigmate.*  
*Elenticum, or ells enthymematicum,*  
 For logicians to loke on, somewhat *sophistic;*  
 Retoricyons and oratours in freshe *humanyte,*  
 Support Parrot, I pray you, with your *suffrage ornate,*  
 Of *confuse tantum* avoydyng the chekmate. 196

But of that supposicyon that callyd is *arte,*  
*Confuse distrybutyve,* as Parrot hath *devysed,*

<sup>22</sup> For the proverb, see Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> Nutmeg and cinnamon are recommended by Peter of Spain for their usefulness in relieving melancholy (*ad tollendum dolorem capitis*). Nutmeg, cloves (*gariophilus*), and musk are all cited by John of Garland for their carminative and tranquilizing effects. Parrot's cry for an electuary or lozenge with musk (*pleris cum musco*) echoes Garland's prescription of electuaries for depressed and debilitated men. See *Obras Médicas de Pedro Hispano*, ed. M. H. da Rocha Pereira (Coimbra, 1973), pp. 97-8, and the *Morale Scolariunt of John of Garland*, ed. Louis John Paetow (Berkeley, 1927), p. 248.

Let every man after his merit take his parte;  
 For in this processe, Parrot nothing hath surmysed, 200  
 No matter pretendyd, nor nothyng enterprysed,  
 But that *metaphora*, *alegoria* withall,  
 Shall be his protectyon, his pavys and his wall.

Lines 190–202 provide partial indications as to how the poem should be read. Skelton here acknowledges that he writes in the aureate tradition and has encased his satire in an allegorical series of difficult figures.

With references to mirrors (190–1), Parrot alludes to I Corinthians 13, in which St. Paul asserts that the human intellect is by nature only capable of incomplete knowledge. In the same chapter (and in I Corinthians 12 and 14), Paul discusses gifts of the Holy Ghost, and the power to speak strange tongues is among them. Ecstatic speech is a form of inspiration less exalted than prophecy, and still less exalted than love, but it is a manifestation of divine favor nonetheless. Since Parrot speaks in numerous tongues and rambles in a fashion that seems incoherent to ordinary mortals, it is clear that he has been richly endowed by the spirit of the Lord. His illogical and incomprehensible verbal outpourings, a mark of his insanity, are also a sign of divine inspiration.

Insight into another aspect of the bird's madness is gained in lines 194–9, when Parrot begs rhetoricians and orators to support him and to avoid the destruction that results from "*confuse tantum*" or "so much confusedly." However, Parrot exhorts every man, according to his ability, to take part in "that supposicyon that callyd is arte," which is composed "*confuse distrybutyve*" or "in a methodically confused way." Parrot has once more suggested that there are two types of madness, one characterized by utter confusion and the other by methodical disorder. In the present instance, he implies that his madness is partly a cloak, assumed for aesthetic reasons; Parrot advocates a disjointed style in the face of the utter confusion of a world careening toward destruction.

Parrot has thus far made several significant points concerning his mental state: His madness (1) proceeds in part from an inclination to conform to the chaos that surrounds him (46–7); (2) is the reaction of one distraught over the horrible evils of the contemporary scene (183–5); (3) is that of one deeply inspired by the Lord (190–1); and (4) springs from obedience to the ideal of stylistic obscurity associated



with the aureate tradition (194-8). As in the case of almost every other issue related to the poem, the bird's derangement is complex. However, the full dimensions of Parrot's madness emerge only when another of Skelton's loaded allusions is pursued carefully.

## V

Wolsey is mad, Parrot is mad, and England is mad. Amidst a whirlwind of dementia that seems about to engulf bird, kingdom, and even the poem itself, a new speaker is heard, Galathea, whose introduction at first appears to be a digression from the central concerns of the work. However, Galathea's role is very much bound to the overall structure of the poem, and she does much to clarify Parrot's nature and why he acts as he does.

Galathea enters unexpectedly about halfway through the poem and begins by requesting of Parrot,

Speke, Parotte, I pray yow, for Maryes saake,  
Whate mone he made when Pamphylus loste hys make.  
(233-4)

Now Pamphilus—and Galathea—were characters in a widely read Ovidian imitation of the late twelfth century, *Pamphilus*. Galathea refers to herself, then, in asking Parrot to speak of the grief of Pamphilus.<sup>24</sup> Yet to consider simply the sexual overtones of the song Parrot sings in response to Galathea's plea will not fully integrate this episode into the structure of the poem. The words of the lyric are a clear allusion to a popular moral ballad of the time. Parrot sings,

My propire Besse,  
My praty Besse,  
Turne ons agayne to me.  
(235-7)

In one version of the Medieval ballad to which these verses allude, Besse is Mankind.<sup>25</sup> It follows that Galathea, also, is mankind and

<sup>24</sup> For a text of *Pamphilus*, see the edition of Eugène Évesque in *La "Comédie" Latine en France au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Gustave Cohen (Paris, 1931), II, 167-223.

<sup>25</sup> This version of the ballad has been printed from the fifteenth century Ritson's manuscript in *Music & Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* by John Stevens (London, 1961), p. 348.

that Pamphilus, as all-lover, is Christ. Parrot thus sings the lament of Christ over the neglect of mankind and, as H. L. R. Edwards remarks, "is actually giving us an illustration of the poet in his most serious guise: the revealer of God's word."<sup>26</sup> Although Edwards' comments do much to clarify the nature of Galathea and, to some extent, that of Parrot, Galathea's role must be examined further, if the final identity of the bird is to be discovered.

Her primary function in the satire is to entreat Parrot to speak in frank and bold terms about the excesses of the times. Galathea's last lines (411–17 and 447–8) especially serve to induce Parrot to vituperate harshly against the evils of the day. Her requests and Parrot's responses to them are thus tied to the main argument of the work, an extended attack on madness. It has been argued that "Speke, Parrot" is dominated by a movement from obscurity to clarity, and that Galathea finally succeeds in prodding Parrot to substitute plain attack upon contemporary ills for his earlier, almost incomprehensible criticism of them.<sup>27</sup> However, such a view is not fully supported by the text. Some of the most explicit language in the poem is found in lines 382a–96, long before Galathea enjoins Parrot to "speke now trew and playne" (448). It is more correct to say that the figure of Galathea provides a transition to the poem's final section (449–517), which is simply another facet of the satire on madness and not Parrot's only genuine attack, to which everything previous has been a kind of prelude. Galathea also assists in revealing who Parrot ultimately is.

If Galathea is mankind, who then is Parrot? The question has evoked many answers.<sup>28</sup> When Skelton created Parrot, he certainly chose a rich literary symbol, one in which many interpretations can find at least some degree of validity. But when the eighty-second

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> See Fish, pp. 151 and 158.

<sup>28</sup> Certainly the responses to this question have been diverse. Berdan states, "The parrot was created by God (l. 217), and is incorruptible (l. 218); it then represents the Church" (p. 142). Nelson, in emphasizing the significance of line 208, maintains that the bird is none other than Skelton himself (p. 183). Edwards argues that Parrot is "the poetic faculty. Parrot represents that strange inspiration which descends upon a man and makes him utter that which will 'not putrefy'" (p. 191). Fish holds that Parrot "is the poet, everyman, and on the narrative level, *Psittacus*" (p. 157). Brownlow surmises that "it looks as if Skelton intended him quite precisely as a poetic version of the lapis philosophorum which transforms all it touches and is itself the effect of a transformation" (p. 14). And according to Lawton, Parrot "is the voice, the conscience, that tells us that in the last resort all, even allegory and art, will fall away" (p. 23).

psalm is consulted,<sup>29</sup> some meaningful answers can be found with regard to Parrot's identity, his insanity, and the movement of the poem as a whole:

Deus quis similis erit tibi  
 ne taceas neque conpescaris Deus  
 quoniam ecce inimici tui sonaverunt  
 et qui oderunt te extulerunt caput  
 super populum tuum malignaverunt consilium  
 et cogitaverunt adversus sanctos tuos.  
 (2-4)<sup>30</sup>

God, who shall be similar to you?  
 May you not be silent nor may you be restrained, God,  
 Since, behold, your enemies have raised a sound  
 And have lifted up their heads over your people,  
 Have given evil counsel, and  
 Have plotted against your holy ones.

Perhaps the single most significant phrase in the psalm is "*ne taceas*," "may you not be silent." In other words, "Speak, God." If the psalmist is asking God to speak, and if Galathea is asking (even praying, 233) Parrot to speak, then Parrot is undeniably analogous to God. Parrot is thus in some sense God. To be more precise, whatever else the web of allusion surrounding the bird embraces, it encloses the idea that Parrot might well be the Holy Ghost, proclaiming God's word. Conceiving of the Holy Ghost as a parrot instead of the usual dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21) is indeed an eccentric parody. However, this daring bit of wit gives evidence of Skelton's reverence as well as his humor.<sup>31</sup> Devotion can be compatible with a certain amount of humorous verbal play directed at the object of devotion. In any event, the bird's wisdom, immortality, divine ori-

<sup>29</sup> The names Zalmane, Oreb, and Zeb mentioned in lines 116-17 of the satire allude to verse twelve of the psalm; the reference to Gebail, Amon, and Amaloch (118) calls to mind verse eight of the psalm. Nelson, pp. 179-80, first recognized this psalm as essential for the comprehension of the satire.

<sup>30</sup> *Biblia Sacra iuxta Latinam Vulgatam Versionem: Liber Psalmorum* (Rome, 1953), p. 191.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of Skelton's playful treatment of sacred material in an earlier poem, "Phyllyp Sparowe," see Ian A. Gordon, *John Skelton: Poet Laureate* (Melbourne and London, 1943), pp. 122-34; also, F. W. Brownlow, "The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe and the Liturgy," *ELR*, IX (1979), 5-20.

Skelton thus knew the traditions of scriptural parody well, and in "Speke, Parrot," he uses them with boldness and imagination.

gin, knowledge of many languages, and the imperishable strength of his utterances are all consistent with the notion that he is the Holy Ghost.

God is asked not to be silent and not to restrain himself, because his enemies have raised a sound ("*sonaverunt*"). He is asked to respond in the manner in which he has been affronted, to combat like with like. A basis for Parrot's homeopathic attack is established. And since part of the evil confronting the object of solicitation (God or Parrot) is *sound*, it is only appropriate that Parrot should put forth a sound to combat the verbose, babbling enemies of the church and of Henry's kingdom.

Certainly Parrot raises a mighty sound! The poem can readily be imagined as being from beginning to end the noisy and animated chatter of a parrot, sound enough to disrupt the evil consultations of any who might be near. Parrot will be similar to Gideon and his men. In the book of Judges, long recognized as a source of Skelton's satire, these Old Testament heroes created an awful din as they blew their trumpets, broke pottery, and shouted resoundingly. In this manner they terrified the Midianites (Judges 7:19-20).<sup>32</sup>

Although Parrot has been charged with evading his responsibility to communicate plainly and to address in forceful terms the evils of the day, it is evident that Parrot in no way evades responsibility or lapses into the inactive world of complaint.<sup>33</sup> He answers as is appropriate, in view of the shortcomings of the times, and as he has been asked to respond. The psalmist's prayer is that God not be silent and, by implication, that he create a din; indeed Parrot has fulfilled these requests admirably. It is true that the meaning of his language becomes more lucid in the concluding general satire (449-517) than in most previous sections of the poem, but it is equally true that throughout the satire as a whole, Parrot has valiantly labored to match sound with sound and madness with madness.

Another way in which to consider the question of movement from obscurity to clarity is that Parrot, as befits a deity, declines to grant immediately and fully the entreaties addressed to him. Rather, he responds at first in a way that is not entirely clear to those whose

<sup>32</sup> On the book of Judges, see "Speke, Parrot," line 117; Nelson, pp. 179-80; and Heiserman, pp. 139ff.

<sup>33</sup> For the view that Parrot's language is irresponsible for much of the poem, see Fish, pp. 157ff.

prayer he has granted. Therefore, Parrot's convoluted declarations of the first few hundred lines of the satire in fact are sufficient answer to whatever prayers might have been addressed to him, although few would know it. After repeated supplications, however, from mankind as represented by Galathea, he grants the prayer in a fashion that not even the most obtuse could mistake.

Other phrases in the Latin text of the eighty-second psalm deserve attention. The psalmist laments that the enemies of the Lord have lifted their heads ("*extulerunt caput*") over the people. Thus Parrot exclaims of Wolsey in line 434:

Hys wolvys hede, wannæ, bloo as lede, gapythe over  
the crowne.

And just as the psalmist objects that God's enemies have been malignant in their counsel ("*malignaverunt consilium*")<sup>34</sup> and have contrived evil plots against the holy ("*cogitaverunt adversus sanctos tuos*"), so does Parrot declaim against the incompetent and noxious advice Wolsey has given to Henry and against the manipulative diplomacy the Cardinal has undertaken on the Continent. It is also possible to see in these two phrases from the psalm, which refer to malignant mental activity, a foreshadowing of the derangement that Parrot both imitates and attacks.

Study of the character of Galathea and of relevant sources leads, then, to further understanding of the bird and his madness. Parrot, instead of simply being inspired by the Lord to prophesy, is himself of divine nature. In addition, it appears that Psalm 82 contains not only biblical names that Skelton incorporated into his satire, but also the germ of several ideas with which he worked. The prayer that the Lord respond in like fashion to his enemies is a primary justification of the bird's insanity as a means to attack the derangement of the times.

## VI

In order to gain a rhetorical vantage point from which to attack Wolsey, Skelton in "Speke, Parrot" has first relied upon the fiction of

<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps only a coincidence, but a significant one, that "*consilium*" also appears in the quotation from Horace found in line 40 of "Speke, Parrot" and discussed above.

madness to depict England's situation as nearly desperate. He then censures madness in a number of ways—through difficult allusions, proverbs, biblical parody, abrupt and apparently illogical transitions, and at times through direct condemnation. The attack is delivered almost entirely by a rambling, squawking, noisy, and insane but divine Parrot. The satire at first seems to be the idiosyncratic soliloquy of a demented mind, but it in fact serves to counter the noxiousness of such minds. Apparent disorganization was a typical trait of satires against the present age.<sup>35</sup> Skelton uses and develops this conventional feature in a sophisticated way.

The satire of "Speke, Parrot" is therefore homeopathic, for homeopathy is a method of curing based on resemblances and according to which a disease is treated by means that would seem to aggravate the disease. References to the idea of like controlling like had from classical antiquity onward been almost a commonplace.<sup>36</sup> In the Medieval period, one such instance occurs in "The Squieres Tale," when a mysterious knight describes his sword to King Cambinskan; the knight explains that a wound inflicted by the sword will close only when touched with the flat of the sword.<sup>37</sup> In view of this example from

<sup>35</sup> See for instance the "Song on the Times" in *The Political Songs of England from the Reign of John to That of Edward II*, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1839), pp. 251–2.

One exception to Skelton's general use of disorder as a satiric technique is found in line 438, which ends with the untranslatable but apparently Latin words, "*bolte harvi*." These words are probably a misprint and not neologisms devised by Skelton and meant to confuse. They can be emended and incorporated into the text as follows:

For of owur regente the regiment he hathe, *ex qua vi*,  
*Patet per versus quod ex vi polet hac vi.*

(437–8)

Wolsey controls a military unit, "from which force, it is evident through these verses that from this force he is powerful, with this force." The alliterative "p" and "v" as well as the repetition of "vi" are consistent with Skelton's poetic practices. Quite possibly, the suggested wording was the original one.

<sup>36</sup> Certain wild, ritual dances of the Dionysiac and Corybantic cults were regarded as homeopathic treatments for madness in ancient Greece. For valuable comments on this subject, see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), pp. 77–80.

Clifford Allbutt finds mention in classical antiquity that "the laying on of the sword, or even the rust of it, healed its wounds; the blood of the Gorgon healed its bane; and so on: these and such beliefs survived through the Romano-Greek period and long afterwards." T. C. Allbutt, *Greek Medicine in Rome* (London, 1921), p. 353. For a brief summary of instances in antiquity and the Middle Ages in which like was thought to control like, see Allbutt, pp. 353–6.

<sup>37</sup> Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1894), IV, 465, lines 156–65.

Chaucer, Skelton would appear, in using a mad fowl to drive insanity out of England, to resort to a quasi-magical process. Skelton's homeopathic satire thus originates not only in the conventions of satire of the times, and in the fundamental notion expressed in the eighty-second psalm, "May you not be silent, God, for your enemies have raised a sound," but also in the venerable tradition of like curing like.

In the more than five hundred lines of the poem, there are many complexities of interpretation as well as uncertainties in the text itself. Yet Skelton demonstrates masterful skill in presenting the realm as near chaos because of Cardinal Wolsey's unchecked efforts to increase his already dangerously great power. It was clever indeed to select a mad parrot to denounce an insane society. It was an ingenious supposition to give the bird the authority of divinity. The difficulty of comprehending Skelton's densely interwoven achievement in no way reduces the merits of his satire. The effort expended in disencumbering partially submerged allusions and in identifying a pattern of repeated attacks on madness can only sharpen an awareness of the intensity generated by Skelton's rhetorical strategies as he responded to an assault on the sense of well-being of Henry VIII's subjects.<sup>38</sup>

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